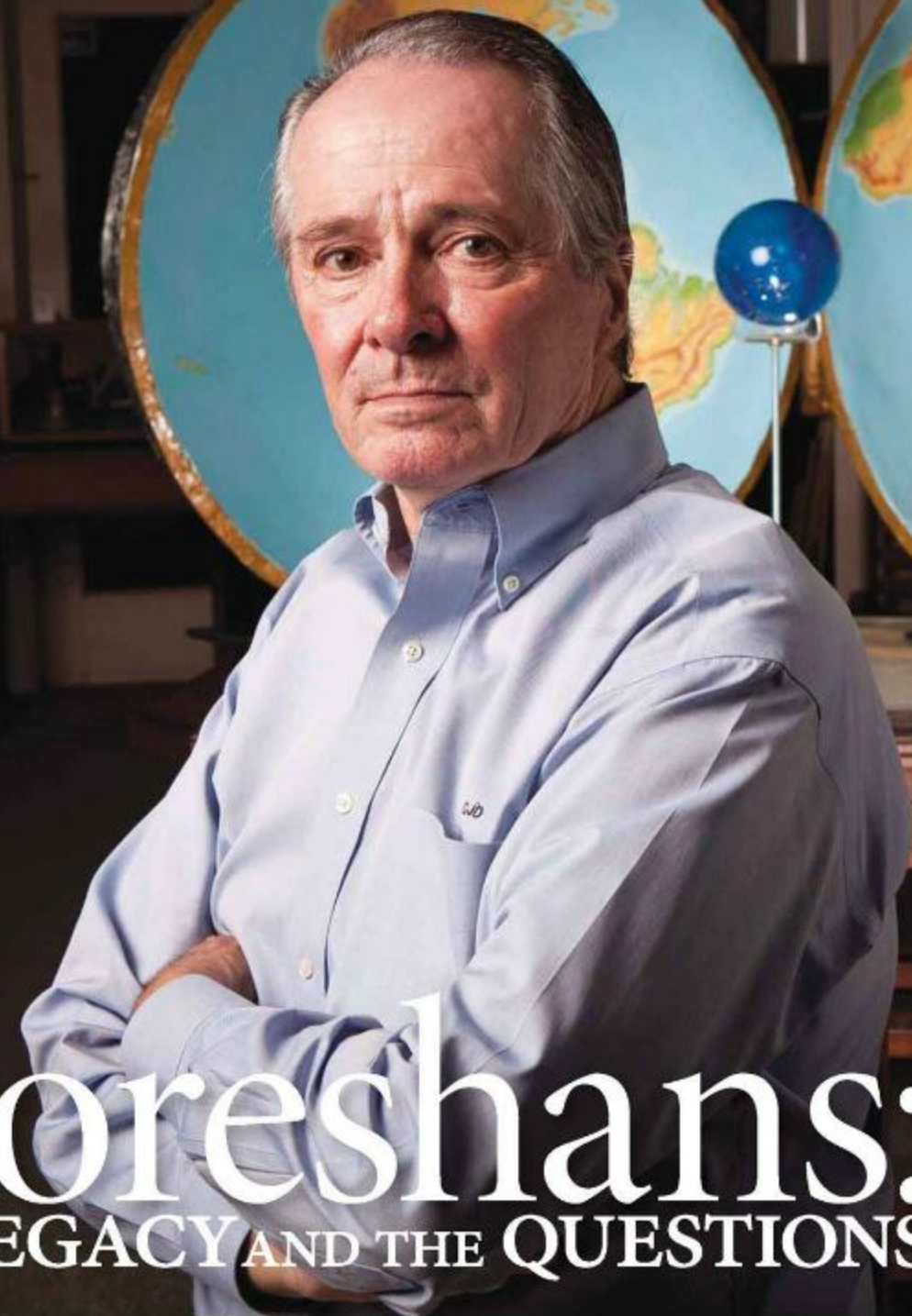


Cult keeper: Charles Dauray stands in front of a model of the Koreshan's hollow earth. For the past decade Dauray has been in charge of the College of Life Foundation, which controls what's left of the Koreshan empire.



# Koreshans: THE LEGACY AND THE QUESTIONS

Author LYN MILLNER explores the origins and what remains of the Utopian cult that called Southwest Florida home.

IN A GATED COMMUNITY A few miles north of Naples, 57 bodies are buried in shallow graves, most without headstones. The only indication they are there is a small white sign: "Koreshan Cemetery #2." Thick fans of saw palmetto and a tangle of oak scrub block it from view.

Even if someone were to hike in, there's not much to see. The people buried here believed in reincarnation and thought they'd be back before long, so they didn't have funerals or tombstones. The few markers that are there were added later by descendants.

They called themselves Koreshans. They came to Southwest Florida more than 100 years ago to build a utopia.

Today, more than a century after the death of its founder, and more than four decades since someone last believed in his teachings, Koreshanity has a legacy shrouded in mystery. What happened to the vast acreage the cult once owned? Where did the money go from selling off huge tracts of Southwest Florida real estate? And how is it that a man with few connections to any actual Koreshans holds the purse strings of what's left?

Like the tenets of Koreshanity itself, the answers are all up for interpretation.

## Cyrus the Messiah

Cyrus Teed was many things—an alchemist, a doctor of "eclectic" medicine and, incidentally, a distant cousin of Joseph Smith's. It seems religious visions ran in the family. But unlike his more famous Mormon relative, Teed was bestowed with more than prophet status. When he was 30, an angel appeared to him and revealed that he was a messiah.

He was working one evening in his laboratory in Utica, N.Y., in the fall of 1869. It had been a momentous day. He had achieved every alchemist's dream—transmuting base metal into gold. Then, around midnight, as he bent himself to his work, he heard "a sweet, soft murmur," he later wrote. He was amazed to discover that he himself was speaking, but in a voice he didn't recognize. A female voice.

"Fear not, my son," she said. "I have brought thee to this birth ... that through thy quickening of me ... the Sons of God shall spring into visible creation."

The angel stepped out of a gold and purple mist, robed in gold and purple. She laid out the entire dogma that would become Koreshanity, built largely on the principles of the primitive Christian church. Teed's new religion included immortal life, celibacy, communal living and equity between men and women.

Another revelation unfolded more slowly and distinguished Koreshanity from any other doctrine: The earth is hollow and we live inside. Where you sit right now as you are reading this, you are firmly on the inside shell of the earth, held there by centrifugal force. The ground curves upward, imperceptibly because the earth is large, after all. If you watch a ship on the horizon, it seems to drop off and disappear, but that is an illusion. As for the sun, moon and planets? They are at the center of this hollow earth. The sun has a dark side and a light side, which is how we have a day and a night.

After his illumination, Teed began seeking followers. He was a doctor, so he proselytized to his patients. Most of them found other doctors. His medical practice suffering, he went from town to town, doctoring and preaching without much success. Defeated, he went home to Moravia, N.Y., and ran his parents' mop-making business—until it failed. After 13 years, he had a handful of followers, including his youngest sister and a brother.

His luck changed on a visit to Chicago, when he spoke to a mental science convention. The mental scientists loved him, especially the women—educated, middle-class women who willingly turned over their money and, in some cases, left their husbands to follow him. No doubt, the women were attracted to Teed's belief in gender equality,



God complex: Cyrus Teed changed his name to Koresh after being told in a vision that he was the messiah.

COURTESY OF KORESHAN STATE HISTORIC SITE

but also to his penetrating eyes, deep voice and dapper style of dress. Marjory Stoneman Douglas, who met him later, described him as a square-jawed, magnetic man. The media were less complimentary. One Chicago reporter called him "an ordinary man of not the highest grade of human origin."

Teed changed his name to "Koresh," a transliteration of Cyrus into Hebrew, and he began to mark the years after his birth as A.K., for "after Koresh." He also developed a branding slogan: "We live inside. Drop in and see us." This appeared on brochures and lapel pins, along with an illustration of the hollow earth split in two.

### A Swamp to Call Home

The Koreshan Unity grew, and the citizens of Chicago began pushing back. There was a bomb threat, a rabid posse intent on lynching Teed and a long list of disgruntled husbands who filed lawsuits. The media reported every detail.

Teed knew, from visiting the Shaker and Harmonist communities, that it would be easier to build a utopian society away from the persecutors and naysayers. Prayer—and a real estate agent—brought him to Southwest Florida where he met an elderly German man who owned 320 acres of swampish land in what is now Estero.

Gustav Damkohler had known his land had a higher purpose when he first saw it. Eleven years before, while hunting for a place to homestead, he floated in his rowboat along Estero River under the shade of a moss-draped oak. And as he rested beside what would become Teed's New Jerusalem, a voice out of nowhere commanded: "Take and dress until the Lord comes."

When Teed visited Damkohler and explained that he was, in fact, the Lord, the elderly German gave him his land. (Some have said Damkohler was one of the earliest victims of a Florida land scam.)

Teed sketched plans for a city of 36 square miles, laid out in a star pattern with crushed-shell walkways. There would be sunken gardens and raised flowerbeds and citrus groves. The main avenues would be 400 feet wide. The city would house 10 million people and be ecologically friendly.

"No dumping of sewage into the streams, bay or Gulf. A movable and continuous earth closet will carry the 'debris' and offal of the city to a place thirty or more miles distant, where it will be transformed to fertilization and restored to the land surface to be absorbed by vegetable growth. There will be no smudge or smoke .... The city will be constructed on the most magnificent scale, without the use of so-called money."

The first five Koreshans slept on the ground outside Damkohler's cabin, where mosquitoes and ground fleas feasted on them. Their first building—a log cabin with a thatched-roof—did little to discourage the insects. One settler said there were "open spaces between the logs that you could almost throw a dog through."

Over several years, the Koreshans built a dining hall, bakery, general store, post office, laundry, blacksmith

shop, sawmill, machine shop and, eventually, a power plant, where the Koreshans generated steam-powered electricity beginning in 1916. There was also a Victorian cottage for the seven women who oversaw the unity—the Planetary Court.

When the last group of Koreshans came down from Chicago in 1903, they filled 15 boxcars with furniture, paintings, clothing, printing equipment, and various possessions, including a baby grand piano. That



Historic artifacts: Much of what is left of the Koreshan society is on display at the Koreshan State Historic Site, which has been meticulously restored by the state.

year, Teed incorporated the Koreshan Unity in New Jersey, modeling it on the structure of the Standard Oil Co., a great irony for someone who believed that capitalism was evil.

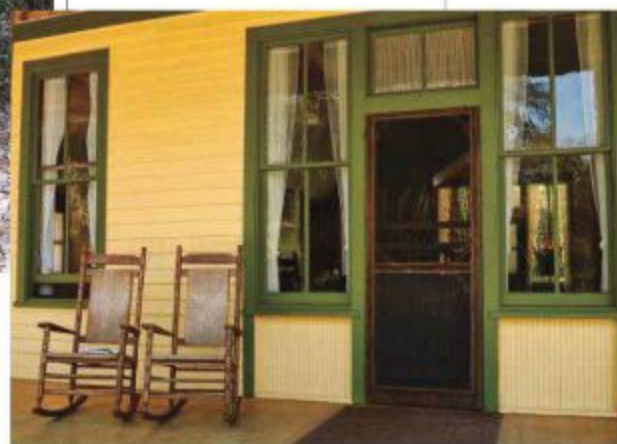
At its height, in 1903, the Unity had 200 members here in Southwest Florida. The Koreshans raised bees and sold honey, built boats and harvested trees for lumber. They caught mullet, so plentiful that they rumbled against the hulls of their boats. The Koreshan bakery churned out hundreds of loaves of bread per day. The printing shop pumped out Teed's revelations by the pound. There was a school for

the children, an orchestra, a brass band, a drama troupe and a chorus.

With the proceeds from their businesses, they bought land—lots of it. At one time, they owned between 6,000 and 7,500 acres, including all of Fort Myers Beach and Mound Key and much of Estero. They incorporated the town of Estero, which was summarily de-incorporated by the citizens of Lee County.

Teed started his own political

Teed sketched plans for a city of 36 square miles, laid out in a star pattern with crushed-shell walkways.



party and told his people how they should vote. This drew the ire of Fort Myers residents. A scuffle over politics came to fistcuffs: The town marshal delivered several strong blows to Teed's head, injuries that led to his death two years later.

When Teed died, a few days before Christmas in 1908, his followers put him in the zinc box he had used as a bathtub. They waited for his resurrection. When his flesh began to rot and lesions appeared on his skin, the brothers and sisters of the Unity called the children to see the body, telling them the lesions were a sign of life: Their messiah

was coming back.

The wake was chronicled by *The New York Times* and in papers all over the country. On Christmas Eve, the *Times* predicted, "the sect will be disbanded unless the resurrection of Koresh occurs tomorrow."

His body blackened and bloated, and he took on the appearance of the Egyptian god Horus, several Koreshans wrote. Hieroglyphics appeared on his limbs. But he did not resurrect. The health department intervened and forced his burial. The Koreshans put Teed's body in a tomb on Fort Myers Beach. A hurricane in 1921 washed him into the Gulf of Mexico.

### Utopia in Decline

Membership fell off after Teed's

death, but the Koreshans lived on for many years. People who know about the Koreshans believe that they were all celibate. And, in fact, the inner circle—the most pious—was. But two outer circles of believers were not, and some of their descendants live in Southwest Florida.

Thomas Edison, who wintered in Fort Myers, attended dramas in the Koreshan Art Hall and drank tea with the brothers and sisters in the Rustic Tea Garden. In fact, Edison and his wife celebrated his 81st birthday there with the Fords and Firestones. Ironically, that night the electricity went out, and they ate by candlelight.

By the 1940s, most of the Koreshans were gone. Many had become disillusioned; the faithful grew old. In 1969, the last original Koreshan, Vesta Newcomb, stopped

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## THE KORESHANS: LEGACY AND QUESTIONS

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believing.

"I did [believe] until the boys landed on the moon. When that happened, I knew it couldn't possibly be true."

What remained was the land, now clearly on the outside of the earth, halfway between Naples and Fort Myers, and gaining in value. The state of Florida got a chunk of it and turned it into a state park, campground and historic site where the bakery, machine shop, Art Hall and Planetary Court have been restored. Shell paths connect the buildings, and the grounds are landscaped with flowerbeds, sunken gardens and giant bamboo from Edison's estate.

The rest of the park is a wilderness of pine, eucalyptus, cabbage palm and live oak. Gopher tortoises lumber across prairies of palmetto; armadillos and marsh rabbits forage

in the dirt; snakes weave along the ground—black racers and the occasional diamond-back rattler and endangered indigo.

### What Remains

At the corner of U.S. 41 and Corkscrew Road, across from the state park, there's a wooden building shaped like a nautilus shell. It's hidden by trees. A sign on Corkscrew Road says "College of Life Foundation." The driveway gate has two "Private Property, No Trespassing" signs. This is what is left of Teed's original New Jersey corporation, now a private nonprofit.

Ask most people what goes on here, and you'll get a shrug, even from Koreshan descendants. One of them told me not to come here. Not to write this story. But he wouldn't say why. The man in charge of the foundation, Charles Dauray, encouraged me to visit. He wanted to set the record straight.

There is no college at the College

of Life Foundation; the name comes from the school Teed started in Chicago in the 1880s, which was never a college either, according to Dauray.

"You worked for six months, gave him your worldly possessions, and he gave you a diploma," Dauray says.

He showed me around. The roof leaks, he says, and the building will be leveled eventually. The developer who owns the land, which originally belonged to the Koreshans, plans to build a community along the Estero River if the real estate market picks up.

The main room—the outer, sweeping curve of the nautilus—has floor-to-ceiling windows that offer a view of the trees and, beyond them, flashes of cars speeding by on U.S. 41. The curtains on the upper windows were Dauray's idea. They're white with gold and purple trim, representing the brilliant mist that Cyrus' angel emerged from

during the 1869 illumination that started it all.

Inside are a handful of Koreshan artifacts. There's the lollipop weight scale that once stood in the general store. A model of Teed's globe, hinged open to reveal the continents laid out along the shell and a cobalt-blue ball at the center representing the heavens. Teed's headstone, which withstood the 1921 hurricane, leans against a wall: "Cyrus, Shepherd, Stone of Israel." The baby grand piano from 1877 that traveled by boxcar from Chicago sits beneath the Koreshan flag. Several ancient typewriters are kept in a glass display case. All of this, Dauray says, will slowly make its way to the state historic site.

Some of it already has: the leather rattlesnake garters Teed strapped to his shins, several pairs of his spectacles, and his business cards. The string of cursive letters after his name is longer than the name itself. Most of the degrees, he seems

to have invented: Cyrus R. Teed, A.M., Ph.D., L.L., D., D., D.

There was a headless torso of a mannequin that wore Teed's white vest, his eagle claw stickpin and his cravat, which he wore in a loose bow. The state has it and will soon send it on a tour of county libraries.

There were papers here, too: books that belonged to the Koreshans, their accounting ledgers, letters to each other and invitations to Teed's lectures. These were transferred to the state archives in Tallahassee a few years ago—more than 300 bankers boxes full. One archivist in Tallahassee told me that the collection was in such disarray that it was clear there had been little attempt to organize it.

Dauray doesn't believe in Koreshanity, but he admires Cyrus Teed's charisma.

"You don't bring people to a swamp with rattlesnakes and chiggers and build an empire. He damn near did it. If he had lived

ten more years, Koreshanity would be a \$5 billion operation," he says, referring to the success of Teed's business ventures and the value of the land Teed amassed.

"Teed would have launched Koreshanity," he says. "Because when you're going 18,700 miles per hour in orbit, there's centrifugal force that keeps you going."

As he finishes saying this, he holds my gaze and widens his eyes—penetrating eyes. It's unnerving until he adds a wry smile, and I realize he's intentionally channeling Teed.

Recently, Dauray dressed as Teed for a Travel Channel shoot at the historic site. He showed me a picture. Except for his height (he is taller than the slight Teed), he was a dead ringer.

How did this curious private museum come to be? One theory is that Hedwig Michel, who took over the organization from elderly believers in 1960, became bitter after she donated land to the state. She



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took artifacts from the state site and put them in what is now the College of Life building. Dauray guesses she intended to compete with the historic site by charging admission to her small museum. But no one was much interested in seeing the Koreshans' possessions. The real value was the land. That's how the foundation got its money—sales of Koreshan and non-Koreshan property.

When Dauray took charge, he met with considerable mistrust from community historians and Koreshan descendants. His opponents called the foundation a scam entity. Dauray says his predecessors are responsible for that bad rap. They are the ones who sold land that belonged to the Koreshans. One director, now deceased, even took Koreshan furniture and put it in her own home. Dauray refers to this era in the foundation's history as "B.C." (before Charles).

He says he was accused of selling off Koreshan artifacts at flea markets, and his life was even threatened in 2002. There were two phone calls (he thinks they were from the same person) after 9 one night.

"After 9 o'clock in Estero," Dauray says, "if you're not asleep, you're probably not sober."

This incident, and Dauray's response, recalls the persecution Teed encountered from Chicago and Fort Myers residents many years ago.

How did Dauray come to be in charge of the foundation? Ask descendants and neighbors, and you'll hear that he was waiting tables when he met the powerful Naples attorney who put him in charge. One person told me he was the lawn man for the property. No one wanted to go on record.

Dauray cites his background in finance and a deep love of history. He chaired the Collier County Historic Society for many years and now sits on the board of the Holocaust Museum and Education Center of Southwest Florida. After becoming chairman of the College of Life Foundation, he made the unpopular

move of reducing the board, which included Koreshan descendants, from nine members to three, and making those same three employees of the foundation. He did this, he says, to make the foundation more efficient.

"Had I not come here, the foundation would be broke," Dauray says. "I find it ironic that many people who complain the loudest are quiet about being the recipients of our donations."

The foundation now donates to community initiatives that coincide with the Koreshans' original interests—reading and eco-friendly activities, money to support a proposed museum studies program at Florida Gulf Coast University, and funds to move two of Estero's historic buildings to Estero Community Park.

Things have changed, he says, and the community has moved along.

What happened to all the land the Koreshans owned? Of the original thousands, only 76 acres remain, and these are protected from development by a covenant from The Nature Conservancy.

Most of it was taken over by squatters after Teed died, Dauray says. Some went to the state of Florida for the historic site. The last large parcel was sold by Dauray's predecessors, to the developer who built Pelican Sound Golf and River Club. The cemetery was not included in the \$5.1 million deal.

With this money, the foundation, under Dauray, bought several parcels around the Estero River with the purpose of building a mixed-use community. When Estero residents opposed this, the foundation sold the land to a developer and financed the sale. Then the real estate market crashed. When the land value tanked, the foundation forgave a large chunk of the loan.

Dauray claims that under his watch, the foundation never sold land that belonged to the Koreshans—and that is mostly true. But in 2010, the foundation sold the cemetery for \$250,000 to the developer of Pelican

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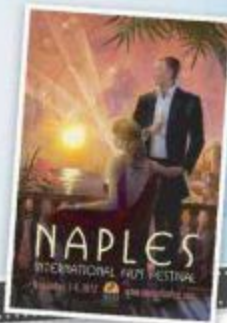
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Bill Grace, a Koreshan descendent, is a vocal opponent of Dauray. He was infuriated when he heard that Dauray had sold the cemetery.

"What was he thinking?" I asked Dauray why he sold it. "This isn't Graceland we're talking about," Dauray said. The folks at Pelican Sound told him that only five or so people visit it every year. "It wasn't serving a beneficial purpose to the foundation."

"But," I said, "you can understand why people would say that selling the graveyard isn't in line with your mission to preserve Koreshan history."

He looked at me and said, "It's being preserved."

In a twist that would irk Grace, Dauray could be right. Pelican Sound's general manager, Jim Whitmore, says that if the developer builds on that land, the graveyard will be fenced off and maintained. Florida law prohibits moving the bodies.

So there lie many of the Koreshans, inside the earth under the large slash pines, waiting for resurrection. If only they could see their community: 27 holes of golf, six Har-Tru tennis courts, a fitness center, pools, two dining venues, a boat launch on the Estero River and meticulously landscaped grounds with red and pink impatiens, liriopse grass, and coconut and reclinata palms.

The history page of Pelican Sound's website makes no mention of the Koreshans. At one time, the welcome page alluded to it—though this probably was not intentional.

"The Sound is calling you. Pass through our gates and experience life on the other side ... After a short visit, we're sure you'll agree, Pelican Sound is the naturally perfect place to be."

Lyn Millner is an associate professor of journalism at Florida Gulf Coast University. She is working on a book about the Koreshans for the University Press of Florida.

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